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Senator Hatfield's Letter

SET ASIDE for a moment the question of what services Antoinette Hatfield, wife of Sen. Mark Hatfield, performed for Greek financier Basil A. Tsakos to merit the payment of \$40,000. Don't even consider whether this payment had anything to do with Mr. Tsakos' ready access to the senator. Assume instead that Mrs. Hatfield has been in Oregon all these years and not selling real estate in Georgetown. Assume that the senator and Mr. Tsakos met on the shuttle or at a PTA meeting. Put out of your mind even allegations that Mr. Tsakos is an international arms dealer and questions about the nature of his brushes with the law in Greece. Now ask yourself the basic question that has been troubling us about this affair: What on earth is a U.S. senator doing writing effusive letters of endorsement on Senate Appropriations Committee stationery for a private entrepreneur about a project on a continent far away?

Mr. Tsakos proposes to build an oil pipeline across Africa and wants us to believe that this will ensure the safe transportation of this valuable commodity to Western markets. Even an amateur student of current affairs might well question the vulnerability—both physical and political—of a pipeline through central Africa. But even if the concept were unassailable, should an individual senator be in the business of promoting the venture to foreign governments and private American corporations? Mr. Tsakos thinks that an endorsement of his project by Sen. Hatfield will persuade African heads of state to allow the pipeline to be built through their countries. He may be right, but a single senator, even the chairman of the

Appropriations Committee, has no business endorsing a commercial enterprise in a manner suggesting that he speaks for our government.

Last December Sen. Hatfield prepared a letter for Mr. Tsakos to use in which he states that "as a national policy maker" he finds "the project to have profound and potentially beneficial impacts on this country's energy and foreign policies." Now most Americans, including the Cabinet members, fellow senators and oil company executives to whom this letter was shown, would know that a senator's opinion is not conclusive on matters of this kind. The executive branch—in particular the State, Defense, Energy and Treasury departments and the CIA—has more expertise and responsibility in this area. But would the president of Sudan, for example, read more into such a letter, and if so, is that what Mr. Tsakos intended?

It is common practice for members of Congress to help businessmen from their own states, particularly those who have contracts with the federal government. It is also standard operating procedure to boost home-state industries, particularly those that employ thousands of constituents. We are even familiar with the more commercial congressional hyperbole—"Joe Smith makes the best chili in the whole Southwest," or "The Wadsworth Widget Company in my state leads the world in this important technology." Sen. Hatfield's assistance to Mr. Tsakos does not fall into any of these categories, and he was wrong to have used his office on behalf of a foreign national trying to promote a multi-billion-dollar deal.